

Bolivia's Government Faces Right-Wing Offensive: Popular forces struggle for unity against attacks

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A chain of events triggered by the passage of a new agrarian reform law, part of Bolivian president Evo Morales' "agrarian revolution" has brought to sharp relief the drive by the right-wing opposition to overthrow Morales' government, even if it means pushing Bolivia into civil war.

On November 28, in front of thousands of cheering campesinos in La Paz, the left-wing president announced that the Senate had managed to pass the law, after three senators broke ranks with the opposition, which has been boycotting the Senate and preventing it from convening. The previous day, Morales had threatened to issue the law as a simple decree to get around the Senate.

This determined move gave the government greater powers to redistribute land that was not performing a "social function." In retaliation, the right-wing opposition launched a new phase in its destabilization campaign, shifting the centre of gravity of the struggle to its home turf. A series of "cabildos" – open town meetings – were convoked for December 15 in the four eastern departments (provinces).

The core of Bolivia's right-wing opposition is the business elites from Santa Cruz, predominantly tied to gas transnationals and large agribusiness, and the U.S. embassy. Their public face is the civic committee of Santa Cruz and the four opposition-controlled governorships of the east.

The largest of these cabildos, held in Santa Cruz, brought around half a million people onto the streets. The meeting resolved to not recognize the new constitution being drafted by the Constituent Assembly if it did not include a form of departmental autonomy which would grant high levels of political, economic, and administrative decentralization to the governorships.

Rising tensions in the East saw clashes in the days leading up to and following the cabildo. Armed fascist youth organized by the Cruceñista [Santa Cruz] Youth Union patrolled the streets, threatening and attacking indigenous people, many of whom support MAS, having migrated east over the last few years in search of employment.

That same day, several thousand people rallied in La Paz and El Alto to condemn the divisive calls by the right and to proclaim themselves in favour of national unity and the process of change being led by Morales.

Conflict shifts to the heart of Bolivia However it was the calls that day by the governor of Cochabamba, Manfred Reyes Villa, in favour of a new referendum on autonomy, and in

support of “independence for Santa Cruz” which swung the site of battle to the heart of Bolivia. Despite attempting to clarify afterwards that he had been wrong in referring to “independence, ” his statements – in a department where 64% voted against autonomy in the July 2 nationwide referendum, and where MAS and Morales are particularly strong – triggered a showdown.

Although there was an immediate response by the social movements, the mass mobilizations were deferred until after the New Year break. By January 8, tens of thousands of mostly indigenous campesinos, cocaleros (coca farmers), and water irrigators, together with workers and other social movements had occupied the centre of Cochabamba demanding Reyes Villa resign for not listening to the will of the people. Attacked by the police, protester anger grew as they burnt down part of the building housing the offices of the governorship

Events turned ugly on January 11, when residents from the middle class northern suburbs of Cochabamba, incited by Reyes Villa and the mass media, marched into the centre of the city armed with sticks, golf clubs, and even firearms to confront the campesinos. They broke through police lines and viciously attacked the protestors. During several hours of street clashes over a hundred people were injured – including five who remain in a critical condition – and two were killed.

In response, Evo Morales cut short his international agenda to attend to the growing crisis. He returned on January 12 in his dual capacity as president of the Republic and of the Six Federations of the Tropic of Cochabamba (also known as the Chapare region), a key force in the mobilizations. Although saying the conflict was one between the social movements and the authorities of Cochabamba, he squarely pointed the finger of blame at Reyes Villa, while asking the social movements to contribute to a solution via dialogue and remaining within the law.

“Now I am much more convinced that the indigenous peasant movement represents the moral reserve of humanity,” said Morales. He called on the social movements to reflect and avoid any further violence or revenge attacks. He proposed to rush through a new law to allow a recall referendum on all elected officials, to avoid further confrontations between those who held positions “legally,” but not “legitimately, ” in the eyes of the population.

A national crisis? That same day, a cabildo of the protestors voted to radicalize their actions by cutting off Cochabamba from the rest of the country and vowing not to leave until Reyes Villa resigned. Reyes Villa, fearing for his physical and political future, went into “exile” in Santa Cruz. The Santa Cruz Civic Committee welcomed Reyes Villa with open arms, having already called for a 24-hour stoppage on January 16 to support the besieged governor.

Three days later, a cabildo was convened in El Alto, where residents declared themselves in a “war to the death” until they received the resignation of both Reyes Villa and La Paz governor José Luis Paredes, who had also recently come out in favour of autonomy. They gave Paredes 48 hours to resign or else be forced out, as confrontation and violence threaten to spill out of the city of Cochabamba.

On the other side of the country, the story was different. A rally called for January 15 by the newly formed Popular Civic Committee of Santa Cruz – made up of organizations of the lower classes opposed to the official right wing controlled civic committee – suspended their

mobilization, due to threats of violent attacks against them by the Crucenista Youth Union.

Saturnino Pinto, president of the Popular Civic Committee said that the mobilization would be postponed “until the authorities follow the law and tell us where we can meet without confrontations. ”

Reporting on the second cabildo held in Cochabamba on January 16, Pablo Stefanoni noted that the leaders of the key social organizations that had led the demonstrations were now “uncomfortably faced with the determination of the campesinos. They were facing pressure from both sides: the calls from the presidential palace and from their base, each time more radicalized after various days of sleeping in plazas and precarious trade union headquarters. ” (See <http://www.clarin.com/diario/2007/01/17/elmundo/i-02501.htm>)

In the end they put forward a resolution that, while continuing to call on the prefect to resign and maintaining the “state of emergency,” gave the departmental council – controlled by a MAS majority – a mandate to continue meeting in Reyes Villa’s absence to work out a legal way to remove him. Stefanoni wrote “persistent whistling blocked out the voice of the speaker and threats forced the [departmental] council to meet ‘in order to name a new prefect.’

“But the pressure coming from the government had its effect. Bit by bit the leaders who respond to Evo Morales – especially the cocaleros – began disappearing and the massive presence in the plaza diminished.”

Afterwards, a small group of ultra-radicals decided to proclaim their own new prefect and “revolutionary government” and to enter the governor’s office, only to be easily repelled by the police. By the following day, even the “new” prefect was complaining that he had been abandoned by everyone.

Whilst unrest continues in El Alto, it seems that Morales has been able to stop the right-wing offensive by winning a possible truce, albeit very temporary.

One country, two political projects

No one doubts, however, that the conflict is far from over as these two political projects – that represented by Santa Cruz elite, and that of the indigenous majority, led by Morales – continue to battle for the future of this country, situated in the heart of South America.

With the advent of neoliberalism in Bolivia in 1985, the Santa Cruz elite which had gained economic influence during the previous dictatorships, moved to directly occupy positions in the state administration. Through the establishment of several pro-oligarchy parties who “fought it out” in Bolivia’s manipulated democracy, they were able to preside over an illusory stability.

However, the resurgence of struggle in 2000 by the indigenous people of the west (Aymara uprising in the altiplano) and centre (Water War of Cochabamba) in 2000, and the rise of the indigenous- and campesino-led Popular Instrument for the Sovereignty of the People – which runs under the registered name of MAS in elections – shattered this stability. The oligarchy’s traditional institutions and political parties become thoroughly discredited.

With the overthrow of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003, these elites were gradually displaced from the positions they traditionally held and lost the direct access they

had to decision making at the national level.

Moreover, confronted with an organized indigenous-majority west, hostile to neoliberalism and where support for Morales is overwhelming (polls in December showed 62% support in La Paz, 79% in El Alto), they began to articulate a political bloc, geographically based in the east (where Morales support drops to a modest 35%). First they focused on defence of “autonomy,” later adding “democracy” to put up a better camouflage of their real goals.

Their aim was to solidify their hegemony in the east where the social movements are much weaker and in many cases aligned with the elites, shielding themselves from the encroaching west. Thus emboldened, they would move towards regaining their influence in the west.

The plan has been to confuse the population, projecting an image of instability domestically and internationally, coupled with calls for “international intervention” and stalling, by any means necessary, the “Democratic and Cultural Revolution” initiated by the massive election victory of Evo Morales in December 2005.

By demobilizing and promoting disillusionment among Bolivia’s combative social movements, they hope to create the conditions to bring down Morales and the MAS government.

A key element in the strategy of the right has been to try to paralyze the work of the Constituent Assembly. They have had some success at this. Despite having been convened on August 6, it has yet to resolve its rules of procedure.

Their calls for “autonomy” are aimed at securing control of national resources and wealth for the governorships they control, whilst they wait in the wings to recapture control of the central government. Their kind of “autonomy” would gravely undermine the ability of MAS government to implement its program.

At the same time, by playing up regional divisions and stoking up separatist sentiments with talk of “independence, ” they are conjuring up fears of the disintegration of Bolivia.

Part of this project is the designation of Phillip Goldberg as the new U.S. ambassador to Bolivia on October 13. Goldberg’s history includes playing a key role in the break up of the former Yugoslavia, a skill which the U.S. government obviously believes could come in handy in Bolivia.

Clearly the current objective of the right is to overthrow Morales. However, the balkanization of Bolivia, including splitting the eastern departments away from the indigenous west and taking the majority of Bolivia’s gas reserves and fertile land with them, cannot be ruled out. If the Santa Cruz elite come to conclude that they have lost all hope on the political level, they could well choose to plunge the country into a civil war, holding out the option of separation of the departments they control from Bolivia.

One reason why the division of the country seems unlikely in the immediate future is the situation in the armed forces. Most commentators agree that any attempt to carve up the country would be opposed, at least at this stage, by the overwhelming majority of the armed forces,

The spectre of separatism, however, could both work in favour or against the indigenous

movement and the Morales government. The right wing is also using this fear as a way to gain a stronger foothold in the high command of the military.

Although Morales has been trying to incorporate the armed forces into his project, very few are willing to speculate as to what is happening internally within an army that has throughout its history intervened to back both pro-imperialist and nationalist regimes.

The shape of things to come This latest push by the opposition has demonstrated its continuing hegemony over large sections of the population in the east, although it has also revealed an emerging, yet still very weak, popular movement amongst the poorer sections in the surroundings of Santa Cruz.

The street presence of the opposition, the concerted media campaign, along with the troubles in the Constituent Assembly, also seem to have swung a section of the urban middle class, who voted for Morales a year ago on the idea that “if a blockader is in government then the blockades will stop,” behind the consolidating bloc that claims to defend “democracy” and “autonomy.”

However it has also revealed that Bolivia’s powerful social movements, who for now are almost entirely behind the Morales government in its democratic and cultural revolution, have not forgotten that their power lies in mass mobilization. They demonstrated this on the streets of Cochabamba and EL Alto.

Part of the political struggle is the need to project a viable and convincing course to defend the territorial integrity of Bolivia and overall social stability. These issues weigh heavily on the minds of middle-class elements and also important sections of the armed forces. They add weight to the need to concentrate on widening the scope of political struggle against the right. The right, well aware of this, seek to avoid political struggle through provocations, street violence, and threats to defy constitutional authority wherever they sense they have the strength to do so.

MAS Senator Antonio Peredo Leigue, writing on January 15, pointed out that “work needs to be done towards the organization and coordination of these movements. The right counts in their favor these faults; they project their provocations confident of finding a reaction amongst the popular sectors. In this way, they want to justify the conspiracy against the government.”

He adds, “The leadership of Evo Morales has reined in, once again, the danger of a national confrontation. It is necessary that this leadership be recognized in order to halt provocations. In this context, the process of change will advance more decisively and the right will be left isolated. The task of the mobilized people is the deepening of democracy.”

The Bolivian masses have a huge task on their hands, and no one doubts that the big clashes are still to come. As the powerful opposition to the U.S. government continues to grow – led by Cuba and Venezuela, and recently joined by Ecuador and Nicaragua in the expanding Bolivarian axis – the U.S. is looking for how it can counterattack.

The role of Morales as an indigenous president within this alliance, who is consciously reaching out to awakening indigenous movements of the region, is crucially important. The indigenous government in Bolivia is the high-water mark in the struggle for indigenous self-determination in the Americas – the main reason it is so hated and despised by the

imperialist powers and why they are determined to crush it.

The current push in Bolivia, perhaps seen as the weak link in this axis, is undoubtedly aimed at smashing this powerful piece of the Bolivarian alliance. The task of all progressives and socialists inside and outside Bolivia is to unite with and defend the Bolivian masses and their government against the attacks of imperialism and its Bolivian agents.

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